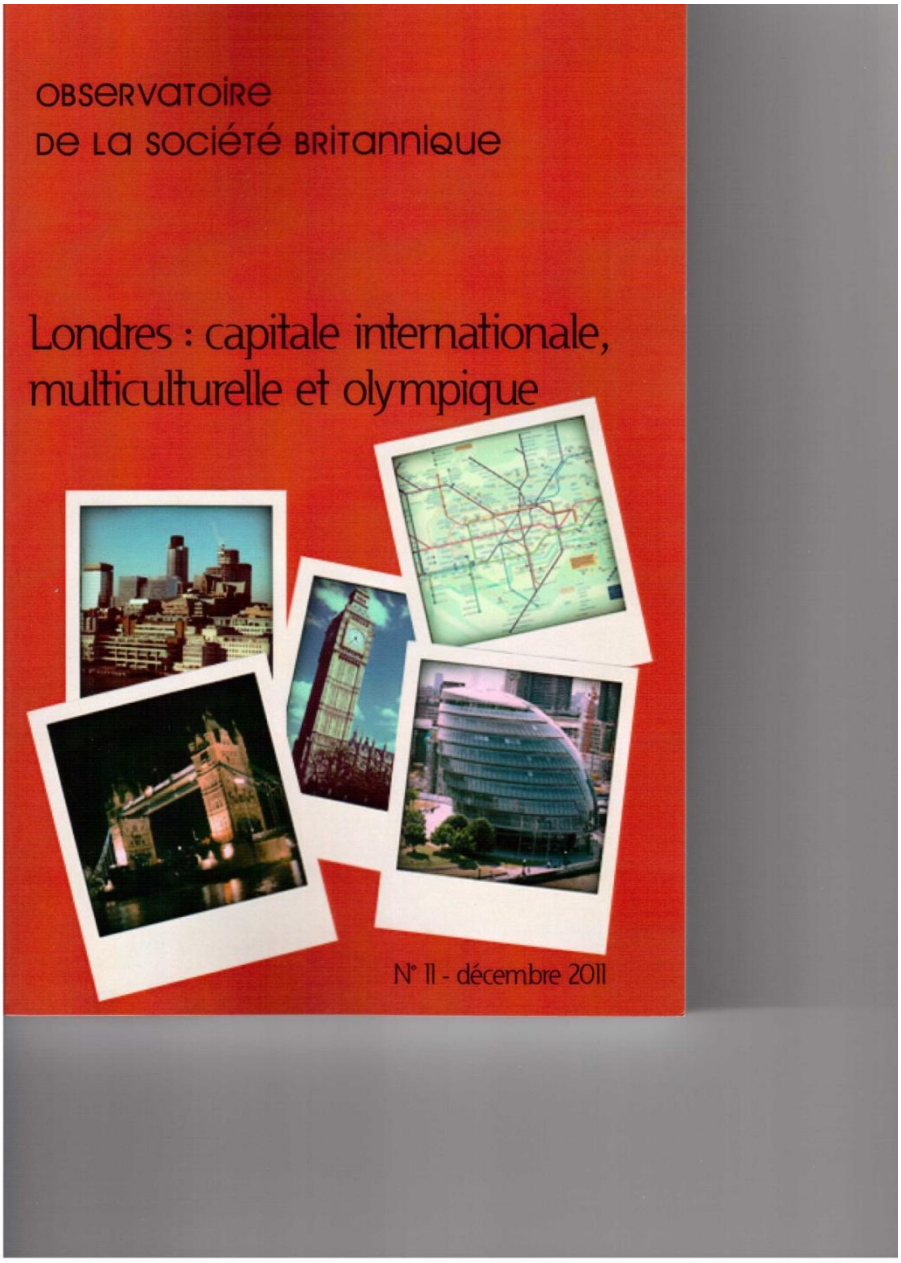
Forewords

Timothy Whitton



Observatoire de la société britannique
N°11 – 2011

Forewords

Timothy Whitton

In 2012 London will come under the scrutiny of the entire world as athletes, spectators and the media converge on the capital city for the Olympic and Paralympic games. In view of this international event the *Observatoire de la Civilisation Britannique* decided to devote one of its publications to London as a multicultural, international and indeed Olympic capital city.[1] This description of London is particularly relevant in today's context given the extent to which the city manages to attract people from all walks of life. The buoyancy and volatility of London's labour market is often given as the main reason for this especially in the contemporary context whereby unemployment in the richer European countries is again reaching unprecedented heights, particularly for young people. Yet London fascinates far beyond the employment opportunities it can offer and the kaleidoscope of languages, ethnic minorities, communities and neighbourhoods that can be found within its boundaries bear witness to the fact that variety is the true spice of life there. To this end, this publication looks not only into the vibrant economy of London but also its recent history, geography and of course politics. London is seen as one of the most international capitals in the world but above all one that constantly strives to meet the challenges of such a demanding reputation.

In the first contribution, Susan Finding reminds us that only a century ago, the multifunctional city of London was steeped in Britain's imperial past to the extent that it had definitely become the capital of the Empire, the throbbing heart of imperial activity. Finding describes the trade activity of London, the occupational distribution and its administrative organisation, emphasising how the municipal socialism of the authorities had to deal with the biggest city in the world in the throes of an urban sprawl. As the population grew, transport rapidly

[1] A majority of these articles are based on a series of papers given at a conference in Nancy in November 2010. The conference was called *Londres: capitale internationale, multiculturelle et olympique* and was organised by the research laboratory IDEA – Interdisciplinarity in English Studies/Interdisciplinarité dans les Études Anglophones.

became a key issue and inevitably led to a city of contrasts where inequality was rife and an ideal target for the reforming Liberal government. Thus the suffragettes would take to the streets as would the Dockers to voice their respective grievances, the former taking full advantage of the imperial celebrations of 1911 to gain greater publicity. London had indeed undergone extensive renovation in the years leading up to the 1911 festivities which were designed to promote the Empire. Yet despite all efforts, spectators tended to be imbued with the history of Britain rather than the greatness of her Empire, mere consumers rather than participants in their country's destiny. Finding remarks that making the Empire accessible to all enabled people to become aware and proud of Britain's greatness in the world, an essential ingredient for an international event such as the Olympic Games to be a success.

In the following article, Carine Berberi questions London's ability to accommodate the euro more easily than the rest of the country given its financial centre which gives it a particular resonance within the European Community. Berberi describes the financial role that London has always played in Britain's history - domestic, international, imperial and now European – and how the city – or City - was divided into supporters and critics of adhesion to the single currency. Since 1997 and Britain's refusal to adopt the euro, indicators show that London has lost none of her financial supremacy. This is because from the launch of the single currency and bolstered by the historic flexibility, independence and fiscal environment of its markets, the City used all its financial expertise to ensure that it was at the forefront of transactions in the euro zone. Even though the City seemed reticent about the euro, opinion polls showed that for the people of London the single currency enhanced the cosmopolitan dimension of their capital making it even more attractive for tourists. Generally speaking, people from the south-east are more favourable to adhesion than other parts of the country and in the same vein, people from London far more than other cities. This leads many observers to state that the City will decide when Britain joins the euro zone. Yet the recent economic crisis has divided the two camps even more between those who feel that adhesion would protect Britain's economy and those who feel that on the contrary, it would weaken it. For the time being and consolidated by recent instability within the euro zone, it would seem as if the City is playing "wait and see" whereas the government's attitude towards the euro appears to be dictated by short term gains, rather like the markets.

Hervé Marchal and Jean-Mac Stébé then take us beyond the boundaries of Britain in order to assess how two of Europe's most important urban nodosities, London and Paris, have fared both individually, together and as competitors in the process of globalisation. Marchal and Stébé provide readers with a precise description and definition of the network of "world" and now "global" cities which tend to govern the planet. Whereas in the past these cities could quite happily ignore each other, globalisation has forced them to become interactive to the point of homogenising much of their activity. London stands out as being exemplary in this process which started in the 1950s but accelerated as from 1979 when the Conservatives came to power. They actively promoted the transformation of the city into one of the leading service and financial centres in the world, to the detriment of a more traditional urban way of life and landscape. London still honours this reputation and has added a long list of high value professional skills and expertise as well as a flexible labour force to these advantages. But above all, London has managed to maintain the easily identifiable geographical cosiness that is so propitious to business thus enhancing its ability to play such a vital role at the heart of the urban planet network. The country's imperial past, underlined elsewhere in this publication, adds the historical dimension to this process linking past to present, the Empire to the multicultural business world to which London belongs.

Paris can count on its demographic dynamism to belong to the family of global cities as well as its economic activity especially in certain high value-added fields of activity. Even though the city's industrial base has been eroded, Paris still accommodates many international firms and the Île-de-France region as a whole is the home to a high percentage of head offices. But above all, thanks to its cultural heritage, Paris stands out as being the main tourist destination in the world. Far from resting on these laurels, Paris has taken full advantage of several major urban renovation projects to bolster its dynamism. Both London and Paris bear the scars of this evolution, the deepest one being on human relations within their boundaries. Local populations in particular have borne the brunt of gentrification and this would tend to underline the duality of globalised cities between the winners and the losers and the challenge that faces future developments in their trajectories as global cities.

In his article, Ian Gordon focuses on the academic interest in global cities and warns that the "superstar" status of some of them can lead to

a form of blindness vis-à-vis their diversity. With this in mind, Gordon examines the economic success of London and its reaction to recent economic instability. During the late 19th century, London was an imperial city whose economy was artisan and service based dependant on a largely volatile workforce living in a competitive agglomeration. At the beginning of the 20th century London turned into a more Fordist national capital as industrial sites moved closer to the major markets and lighter industries settled in and around the capital. As manufacturing employment in Greater London declined, so the nature of the local population changed ushering in the era of London as a post-industrial global city, harking back in some respects to the situation it had known in the late 19th century. As from the early 1980s, London's real potential was unleashed by the combination of international competitive forces and domestic deregulation. This was compounded by high population growth boosted by migration, especially international inflows attracted by the higher wages paid in the capital. This was all the more so once the industrial decline had been absorbed by the London labour market. Yet at the same time, the emerging sectors of finance, information and communication were turning cyclical sensitivity to the labour market into the norm: the boom-bust syndrome was associated with economic dynamism, innovativeness and competitive advantage, a far cry indeed from an earlier period when such fluctuations were perceived as structural weaknesses.

Gordon continues by explaining the particular volatility of the London labour market in the context of what is known as the "new economy". He suggests that the "bust" at the beginning of this century could have had disproportionate effects on London employment but in fact did not. Indeed, the labour market in London remained fairly buoyant during the first stages of the credit crunch caused by the sub-prime fiasco in the United States not only because it had fewer jobs in manufacturing but above all because its knowledge-based economy is far more competitive than elsewhere. Gordon also underlines the impact of employment growth in the public sector during this period – particularly in London - which offset many jobs shed in the private sector. Government "bail-outs" in order to protect the financial system also contributed to keeping employment buoyant or at least to avoiding huge layoffs in some parts of the banking sector. All in all it would seem that London has to be permanently ready for the next boom.

Martine Drozdz examines the forces at play between the territorial expansion of the City and the dynamics that lie behind its contribution to the global financial markets. Following the big bang in 1987 and the need for increased office space for British and international companies alike, large swathes of land particularly to the north and east of the City were transformed, often absorbing areas not contained within its historic boundaries. A clear priority was given to office space to the detriment of residential infrastructures thus increasing reliance on the transport system to make workplaces accessible. Residential complexes have thus burgeoned on the outskirts of the areas taken over by the City's expansion but plans to increase population density there do not always tally with local populations' views of how their neighbourhoods should be renovated, or with other development plans already under way. Some of these areas have been continually renovated since World War II to form a very heterogeneous urban mosaic in which residential developments of many shapes and sizes are being inserted. Local authorities in turn are under pressure to build and the Olympic agenda also means that construction is looked on favourably. To illustrate her argument, Drozdz gives some colourful examples of the projects underway and goes on to point out that local residents have very little say in these matters even if some vociferous groups have on certain occasions won their cases. Given their financial situation, local authorities can but approve most projects and cajole local opinion by obtaining suitable compensation for residents. The expansion of the City's territory has certainly slowed down recently but is still frowned upon by local populations even though they are generally powerless to stop it.

In the following article Manuel Appert looks at London's skyline. Skyscrapers and high-rise blocks have improved the attractiveness of real estate in many areas by helping to increase urban density while enabling those who design them to leave their particular architectural signature on the space occupied. Given that they can provide a real "all-in-one" hub for commercial activity, these buildings also symbolise cities' ability to keep abreast of globalisation and, as such, have been fully integrated into the highly competitive property market. But because in some instances they compete with other historical buildings in sculpting the skyline, opposition to their construction can be strong especially when they interfere with considerations such as identity and memory, St Paul's Cathedral being the perfect example in London. It is only over the last fifty years that commercial buildings have competed

with more historical ones in London and gradually, location rather than mere quantity has become the keyword. In more recent years the Greater London Authority has been particularly active in emphasising the need for skyscrapers that can contribute to bolstering London's financial activities without fundamentally restructuring the skyline. Exceptions have been made for some very high quality architectural projects – such as the Shard – and have exacerbated tensions between the different forces involved in urban regeneration. Despite the presence of some outstanding architectural projects devoted to business, a majority of the recent high-rise buildings are residential tower blocks. Baring a few exceptions, they tend to be concentrated in the most densely occupied areas and generally obey the rule that the more expensive the land, the higher the tower which is in the interest of all parties involved, especially property developers and borough councils. High-rise projects tend also to be faithful to the functional distribution of space and areas which have diversified their occupations and have attracted different types of skyscrapers accordingly. Certain distortions can nevertheless be identified especially when it is in local residents' financial interest to support a particular type of building. It would be churlish to suggest that high-rise building in London has been purely market orientated and monument view protection has been a serious preoccupation of the authorities, once again with exceptions. The Greater London Authority's "London Plan" is in tune both with urban regeneration and the city's need to constantly renew its efforts to keep pace with the challenges of globalisation. Tall buildings map out the use of urban space and as such are the true beacons not only of urban densification and regeneration but also of the potential input of public private partnerships in maintaining London's global reputation.

Timothy Whitton deals with the change of mayors that occurred in 2008 when Ken Livingstone was replaced by the Conservative, Boris Johnson. Whitton recalls the early days of Ken Livingstone when he was leader of the GLC from 1981 until 1986 and explains that Mrs Thatcher got rid of the Metropolitan Councils mainly to stamp out their particular brand of municipal socialism that did not tally at all with her political project. Following abolition, it took fourteen long years for central government in Great Britain to realise that the capital city had lost its voice and one of New Labour's election pledges was to establish a new authority to deal with pan London questions. Hence the creation of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and a mayor elected directly by Londoners. Having been excluded from the Labour Party, Livingstone

won the election as an independent candidate and his first term in office saw the implementation of the congestion charge in central London. This success was enough to insure a second victory in 2004 but from then on, Whitton contends that it was a downhill struggle for the mayor. Despite Livingstone's contribution to London being awarded the Olympic Games in 2012, he had the reputation of "lording" it over the city while dealing with international affairs that had little to do with his responsibilities as mayor. His office became bogged down in sleaze and scandal to the extent that his rival, Boris Johnson, was able to make full advantage of his campaign slogan "Time for a Change". London has definitely changed since the GLA was created in 2000 but in 2008 somehow Livingstone was no longer "our Ken" as many Londoners would fondly refer to him.

Nancy Holman and Andrew Thornley question how Boris Johnson, the new mayor of London elected in 2008, will manage to combine his particular brand of popular pragmatism both with the capital's need for integrated policies on a regional scale and a strong sense of leadership. London is indeed such a diverse city that only coordinated cross-borough policies can provide the sort of cohesion that will give Londoners a sense of having a shared future. Holman and Thornley remind us of recent changes in local government in London, emphasizing the effects on strategic planning following the removal of the Greater London Council in 1986. The authors contend that the subsequent minimalist approach to local government in London led the private sector to become far more involved than before in improving the capital's competitiveness in the transition from international to global city status. Yet despite these efforts, London lacked a single authoritative voice capable of clearly mapping out the city's future. The Labour government elected in 1998 acknowledged this void and duly created the Greater London Authority in 2000 with a directly elected mayor. His main remit is to coordinate strategies for London in the form of the London Plan, which the authors use to compare the first mayor of London's approach to sustainability with his successor's.

Once elected, the first London mayor, Ken Livingstone, chose to use the plan in order to adapt London's infrastructure in a sustainable way to the growth the city needed in order to be able to compete as a global capital. The idea was not to increase spatial occupation but to develop sustainability guidelines that local authorities could use in exploiting existing land more efficiently. The Plan was thus an attempt

at creating a shared and joined-up "vision" of London between central and borough government but its authoritative style did not always go down well. Indeed, the 2008 mayoral elections were the opportunity for Boris Johnson to show that he could provide a suitable alternative to Livingstone and intense canvassing meant that they also showed a certain degree of political success of wealthier outer London over Inner London. Nevertheless, the authors suggest that because of this divisive style, the new mayor will find it difficult to be a strategic leader. Johnson's Plan is much the same as his predecessor's but will apparently be used less forcibly to control the boroughs even though the overall aim of striking a happy balance between the role of the private and public sectors will be maintained. Johnson intends to give boroughs more leeway in their relationship with central government so that local planning can fit in with rather than have to adapt to strategies emanating from the centre. In this respect it must be said that Livingstone was far more dominant and used a broader definition of sustainability to indicate long-term choices for the whole city rather than individual notions of quality of life. The authors feel that sustainability in terms of balancing the needs of the economy, society and environment will inevitably suffer from this new approach and to emphasize their point, compare the two mayors' Plans. Their analysis leaves little doubt that whereas Livingstone's Plan tended to be more explicit providing prescriptive strategic guidance, Johnson has adopted a far looser, conciliatory approach. Holman and Thornley believe that this will weaken the overall strategic vision of future planning in the capital.

Nassera Zmihi then reminds us to what extent rough sleeping is a blight on London's image especially in the light of the targets set by successive governments. There is no denying that the number of people sleeping on the streets of London has declined over the last two decades but it is unlikely that the Olympic "effect" will be sufficient to eradicate the phenomenon. Counting "official" rough sleepers acknowledged by the social services as such is an almost impossible task given their high mobility and this difficulty has been compounded by the arrival of immigrants from eastern European countries. Even so, Zmihi supplies some figures as an indication of the numbers involved and sketches out the various initiatives implemented recently along with cost assessment. In order to tackle homelessness in the capital local and central government have attempted to use the joined-up approach under the auspices of the London Delivery Board. Yet targeting the specific needs of the homeless is complex given the different categories of people

concerned (rough sleepers, roofless, address less…) and at times, internment, expulsions and Anti Social Behaviour Orders have been used to reduce the number of people sleeping in the streets of London. Zmihi gives a vivid account of even more coercive methods that some authorities can use on occasions in order to rid the streets of rough sleepers. Despite this, there is little chance that even with the Olympic Games in full swing, people will be able to claim that no one is sleeping rough in London.

Jeremy Tranmer reminds us that London has always been host to a multitude of demonstrations and adds that recent new forms of action have had a considerable impact on the geography of protest in the capital. Generally speaking, capital cities are the ideal places to organise protest and London is no exception. To this end, Tranmer lists some of the main demonstrations that have taken place there over the last two centuries and points out the route that a vast majority of them took, usually from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square or vice-versa. Tranmer continues by studying some of the more symbolic places of protest in London and the extent to which they give legitimacy to protest. Recently, protest geography has changed as illustrated by the May Day marches which tend to target symbols of the city's role as an international capital of finance. These anti-globalisation demonstrations also dwarf other protest movements which Tranmer describes in detail. He underlines the influence that new forms of anarchism have had on protest and analyses the reasons for the reappearance of such a model of political expression. The decline of the traditional left, modern methods of communication and the attraction of radical methods of protest as being more media friendly are examined by the author. The upshot of this is that the space devoted to protest in London has expanded and has become more fluid and unpredictable. The author suggests that this inevitably contributes to creating an alternative London where economic imperatives can be challenged, albeit symbolically, by a more libertarian vision of the city.

The last contribution to this book also looks into the protest geography of London but focuses more particularly on space occupied by opposition movements to the Olympic Games. Cities which host the Games are subject to a period of considerable tension between the different parties involved while local residents tend to bear the brunt of strategies designed to prioritise land occupation. Generally speaking, their protest is swamped by the enthusiasm generated by the extensive

media coverage and to illustrate this, Corinne Nativel draws comparisons between the demonstrations organised round the winter 2010 Games in Vancouver and the summer 2012 Games in London. Nativel's theoretical stance is that the politics of the Olympic Games easily compete with the sporting event given that the host city has the world's spotlight focussed on it. Given this stark reality, the success of the Games often depends on how local communities "buy in" to the Olympic ideal against a backdrop of commercial exploitation, extensive renovation and sometimes financial scandal. Nativel dwells on the concept of militant particularisms whereby local communities defend their perceived rights to land despite the authorities' claims that the overall legacy of the Games will be the sustainable regeneration of large areas of the host city. Their claims fall foul though of the failure of recent Olympic cities to be able to boast any real improvement to the everyday life of local communities.

Nativel then reminds us of London's 20th century involvement in the Olympic Games and the application to host them again in 2012 after the successive failures of Birmingham and Manchester. That "red" Ken Livingstone, mayor of London, should have accepted to apply in 2003 seemed to be go against the grain of his convictions but he was quite obviously seeking funds to renovate the east end of London. Londoners do seem enthusiastic about the Games despite the spiralling costs and realise that they will contribute to the renovation of the Lower Lea Valley. Nativel lists the transformations that are under way while emphasising the authorities' attachment to the legacy of the Games. Yet the critics have been quick to point out that the environmental beauty of the Lower Lea Valley will suffer irretrievably from the short term onslaught of the Olympic Games and even the job creation involved will not offset this major drawback.

Opposition to the Games in London has highlighted public opinion's general distrust of the multinational companies involved. Security measures verge on the military and the authorities intend to experiment innovative biometrical identification equipment which acts as a stark reminder that Britain is at war. Working conditions for employees on the Olympic site are also cause for concern as are questions concerning the damage the Games will wreak on the environment, but generally speaking it is the displacement of local residents which is the most unpopular. This was the case for Vancouver where a whole neighbourhood was taken over by property developers

whereas in London, displacement has concerned more isolated areas and groups of people, sometimes with claims based on particular activities.

Nativel continues her analysis with two case studies concerning militant organisations in London opposed to the Olympic Games. One considers itself to be a watchdog whose main aim is to supply public opinion with information and the other, a more militant organisation drawing on the experience of the transnational anti Olympic urban network. It would seem as if the protest movement in London were more sporadic thus lacking a broad structural base. The key to this lies in the integration of local networks that would give the overall movement a more long-term credibility and substantially reinforce its ability to organise, react and even thrive. In turn, this could attract more political attention, as was the case in Vancouver, and increase public awareness of the issues at stake. To this end, it is difficult to talk about a real anti-Olympic movement in London even though recent demonstrations focussing on budget cuts have shown that the potential for protest definitely exists.

London will indeed be the centre of attention during the summer 2012 but its success as a global city stretches far beyond the Olympic agenda. This publication attempts to underline to what extent the geography, politics and history of the "Big Smoke" are intricately interwoven, and to identify the points where these forces converge to provide Londoners with a sense of identity. This is one aspect that the architects of the capital city's future will have to pay particular attention to if they want to avoid disappointing the people who are attracted by what London actually means rather than merely what it represents.